

A Cloud Removed

The Misunderstanding of Frank Dillon and the Power of a Child's Christmas Gift

By EDITH G. BAYNE

PEOPLE turned for another look at the tired, old-young woman in the rich furs and the golden-haired prattling child who moved about in the throng of Christmas shoppers. Surely an ill-assorted pair they were—the woman, listless, bored, restlessly wandering from counter to counter—the child, eager, bright-eyed, radiating happiness, her small arms full of bundles.

"Oh, mother, let's buy daddy's here!" she cried, stopping short before a case of gentlemen's novelties.

The woman murmured something mechanically, as she had done a score of times already, when the child had tugged at her arm and reminded her that "daddy's" gift had still to be purchased.

"Very well. Choose quickly, and I will go on towards the door."

It seemed a long time to the woman, waiting, until the little girl came up gleefully clasping a large, square bundle.

"It's a cigar set, mother. I 'member how he used to smoke and blow big rings over my head. Won't he be s'prised, though!"

A car full of delighted people were entertained on the way home, by the overflowing spirits of the little shopper. Many times she dropped packages, which had to be stowed in her mother's muff, but like a vise the small arms clung to "daddy's" cigar set. A greybeard opposite smiled involuntarily and longed in his innermost being for the fountain of perpetual youth—and that once-cherished belief in Santa Claus.

"But, mother!" cried the child, suddenly, in a loud whisper, "what have you got for daddy? Are you keeping it a s'prise?"

The mother smiled wanly under the eyes of the passengers, and whispered something to her daughter.

"Oh, all right. I'll be quiet, only you can't fool me, you know. I b'lieve you've bought him something pretty nice. Never mind. I'll know to-morrow."

THE Connaught Apartments frowned upon children as a rule. Marion, however, by virtue of having first seen the light of day there, was permitted. Also, her parents had leased the best suite. The rooms on the morrow were to be filled with a gay assemblage of little folks, who were to do honour to their small hostess and to be entertained with a real, live Santa, who would denude a gorgeous tree for them. Festoons of green and wreaths of holly hung at the windows and in the farthest corner of the drawing-room the majestic tree spread its promising branches.

"But it's daddy I'm *most* anxious about, mother. I don't care for the party nearly so much. He will come, won't he?"

"Perhaps," answered the woman.

How could she say, "No, he will never come back. He said so." The clear eyes of the child would have searched her very soul and demanded the reason.

"He would not stay away Christmas Day, the best day of all the year, and leave us alone, would he, mummy?"

"Perhaps he—has forgotten us."

The reproach in the blue eyes hurt her even as she spoke.

"No, he would not, mother, and I *know* he will come back." Thus she had persisted.

An hour later, when dinner was over, Marion arranged her gifts. The porter, summoned, bore off half a dozen dainty be-ribboned packages to those of her friends who could not come to the party. As he took them up one by one in his arms he came to a rather large, square one, which was tied with broad, red ribbon.

"No, James, not that one. That's daddy's."

She laughed merrily and pointed to the superscription, which was in her own large, straggling characters.

"Yes, that's for my daddy. He's coming to the party, didn't you know?"

The man glanced covertly at Mrs. Dillon. Her back, happily, was turned. He smiled indulgently and patted the curly head.

The hands of the clock nearing eight announced bed-time, and soon Marion's yellow head was among her pillows, and the realities of the day had given place to delicious dreams of mysterious parcels.

Mrs. Dillon in the drawing-room was putting the finishing touches on the tree. Close to the floor on a lower branch, and probably as high as the

young giver could reach, hung the box for the absent "daddy." Scrawled across the top the message ran: "For my dear daddy, from his loving Marion."

Oh for the faith of a little child! Amy Dillon's throat tightened and she turned away. On a small table lay a gift of her own which had arrived that morning—a costly trinket in a velvet box. She opened it again, but the flash of diamonds brought no answering gleam to her eyes. Once she might have gone into ecstasies over the beautiful, glittering thing, but now—

The clock striking the half-hour after eight roused her, and simultaneously came a discreet knock on the outer door.

She glided swiftly over and opened it.

"Oh—you!" she said to the man who stood without.

"None other—whom did you think it was?" he said, stepping inside, with the air of one perfectly at home in the luxurious little flat.

She made no reply and he continued:

"You see, being a privileged person, I dispense with the porter, sending up my card, etc. I take it for granted—"

"You take a good deal for granted," said Amy, incisively breaking in, as he seated himself near the fire. He gazed at her a moment. Her face was inscrutable. He was used to her joking little ways, but this time the smile that would have belied her words was missing.

"Your welcome this evening is not the most cordial," he said, rubbing his hands before the blaze.

She had not invited him to remove his overcoat, which at first he was about to do, but something in her manner restrained him. He took out a fresh cigar which he bit, but did not light.

"Hm!" he muttered, eyeing her restlessly.

"Where's the little girl?" he asked, abruptly.

"Gone to bed."

"Amy—will you explain to her that I can't play the Santa role to-morrow?"

Mrs. Dillon made no reply.

"I'll send her a present," he went on, doing his best to appear nonchalant, when he well knew that the mother of the little one had come to the point where she could no longer treat him with more than mere civility. "By the way, did you get my little gift this morning?"

She turned and picked up the velvet case.

"Won't you put it on—and come to the theatre? I have two seats."

She gave him a look that meant more than she could express in words.

"Man, you know that I won't go. You have no business to ask me. As for the gift, you had no business to send it—and I can't keep it. Please go and leave me. I have never encouraged you to come otherwise than as an acquaintance. I am sure you have forgotten—"

He did not reply. Slowly Jim Holden buttoned his overcoat. He it was—

"Marion, go back to bed instantly!"

"I thought I heard my papa," she said.

He did not reply, but opened the door and went out, closing it softly.

LEFT alone, she turned the gas out and sank into the big chair before the fire. It was dying out, so she stirred it up and stretched out her hands to the blaze. Marion had returned to bed and the rooms were all in darkness save for the firelight glow. Amy's thoughts had fallen into the old, lonely strain. The hard lines softened, the weary eyes drooped and presently a tear stole down her cheek, followed by another and another until great sobs shook her. A strange and lonely scene, on this night of all nights! Away in the gloom of the farthest corner stood the tree, gaily trimmed, seeming to mock at her in its tinsel trappings. From without came sounds of the city world—merry sleigh-bells, the crisp, crunching of snow as many feet passed over it, the jangle of cars and the tooting of motor-horns. This was the gayest and merriest night of the whole year, and yet before a solitary fire sat a still more solitary woman, who saw only the stern, drawn face of a man as he had looked upon her last, and said:

"And you shall not want for anything—you and the child."

They had not wanted for anything. Every month had come his generous cheque and she had taken

it for Marion's sake. How much longer could she continue to take it and live upon his bounty? He had believed her careless of him. He would not listen to her. All explanations were unavailing, he had said. Francis Dillon was proud—none prouder. Amy lived again over that last scene, shuddering at the recollection.

A SLIGHT sound, the slightest possible sound, roused her. She shivered with cold and fear. Again the sound—a step it was and in the very room! Her senses suddenly and keenly alert, she remained in hiding before the darkened fire and in the shadow of the great arms of her chair. How much time had passed she could not tell. The fire was long since dead. From somewhere behind her came again the footsteps and the sound of a match being drawn across the door.

"Who—who is that?" she at last cried out, as the match, flaring up, revealed to her a tall man, muffled in overcoat with fur cap pulled low. An exclamation of astonishment from the intruder! He had doubtless not reckoned on the darkened drawing-room being occupied. Boldly, however, he reached for the gas jet and at once the room was flooded with light.

No burglar, this!

"You—and here—at this hour!" said the tall man. "I thought the gay dance at eleven p.m. would claim you, and that I could steal in unknown to anyone—to see my child."

Before he had finished she had screamed once, twice, and then sank back into the chair.

"Just remember the hour," he went on, "and do not rouse the house."

"Frank!" she breathed, in a weak, wholly unbelieving voice, "oh, Frank!"

The eyes of the man gleamed oddly from beneath the fur cap. Suddenly he remembered that he should remove it, and did so, gazing at her in silence.

"So you are at home—for once!" he said.

She did not reply, being, indeed, overwhelmed with surprise and various other feelings.

"Where is Marion sleeping?" he asked, drawing some parcels from his capacious pockets.

"In the same room," replied Amy Dillon.

He looked about the apartment, as a stranger returned to his native land from long absence in foreign countries might view old, familiar spots. His eye caught the gayly-decorated Christmas tree and he smiled, a little grimly. Amy pointed to a lower branch.

"Marion left something there for you."

The man strode across and read the child's affectionate words on the outside of the big, square package. He read them twice, slowly.

"She remembered," he said, brokenly.

"And I did, too, Frank, I did, too!" cried Amy, hotly. "I have never had a moment's happiness since you left us—ten months ago."

His face hardened again. He believed her to be lying.

"And you say this! What of Jim Holden—"

"I have sent him away, Frank."

He looked his unbelief.

"I am innocent," she cried, passionately, "and have always been. Only your insufferable pride and temper prevented you from hearing me."

At the display of fire, on her part, the man gave ear. He had not listened to her before. He was compelled to do so now. She gave vent to all the pent-up wrong that had been racking her heart and mind for the past ten miserable months.

A scrambling sound from the next room broke in upon her and she ceased as a long, delighted scream rang through the room. Their voices had unconsciously risen and again the little night-robed figure had parted the curtains. Like a white rocket it flew straight into the arms of the fur-coated man and nestled there.

"I've got a s'prise for you," said Marion, presently; it's on the tree, but you mustn't have it till to-morrow. When is to-morrow? It should be most here. Oh, mumsy! Didn't I tell you he'd come!"

Then she began rummaging in the pockets of the big, fur coat, while the wearer laughed and the woman, looking on, smiled—her heart warming at the sight. In the midst of it all, a sudden pealing of many bells rose on the air, sharpened in sound by the keen frost.

It was Christmas morning!